

The Builder.

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THE struggle between the advocates of the rival gauges, has led to the production of a large number of books, touching railways, the majority of them with the view of influencing public opinion, rather than of obtaining profit for their author by the sale of them. The friends of the narrow gauge have been the most energetic in this course, and there is no doubt that it has materially contributed to produce the conviction now so generally felt, that the broad gauge must yield to the narrow; a conviction materially strengthened, of course, by the recent report of the Board of Trade on this subject, and the proceedings of Government thereon.

In addition to the books thus produced, have been many others on the history of railways, the construction of railways, works for the instruction of railway surveyors, and pamphlets on railway administration and railway accidents; so that a collection of the whole would form a railway library of no small extent.

That our Governments have acted blindly in respect of railways, from the first development of the system till the present time, is universally admitted; property has been wasted to an immense extent in consequence, and many advantages sacrificed which, by another course, might have been obtained without difficulty. No guiding power over the various wealthy companies, enabled by Act of Parliament to traverse the land, and intent solely on carrying out their own views and promoting their own interests, has been exerted; no provision made for general concordance, no thought, in short, taken for the future. The necessity of interference, for the sake of the public, has been long seen and advocated, still Government has kept aloof, until the inconvenient results, now only beginning to be felt, force them to step in, to try to remedy what they ought to have prevented.

The Committee of Privy Council for Trade, called on to inquire into the question of gauge;—to propose a cure for what was incurable, without a great sacrifice,—performed their difficult task much in the manner that might have been expected: they recommended that none but the uniform narrow gauge (4 feet 8½ in.) should be used in all public railways now under construction, or hereafter to be constructed—with a few specific exceptions; but as to producing uniformity of gauge, they say:—

“Adverting to the vast expense which must be involved in an entire alteration of the broad gauge, and having regard to the circumstances under which the companies employing this gauge were established, and to the interests they have acquired, my lords cannot feel themselves justified in recommending that it should be proposed to Parliament to compel the entire reduction of the seven feet gauge.”

They assume that the uniformity of gauge cannot be obtained, and then proceed to submit regulations, to reduce the admitted inconvenience inflicted on the public within the narrowest limits.

Resolutions to give effect to their lordship's recommendations are now before the House

of Commons, and will probably be made law. We venture however to assert, that a long time will not elapse before the question is again mooted, and that when this is the case, the adoption of some means to produce absolute uniformity of gauge will be insisted on. The evils of the break, the annoyances and expense it entails, are every day more felt, and the agitation against it grows every day stronger.

Mr. Sidney, in his work on the “Railway System,”* gives the following summary of opinions on this point:—

“Mr. Brunel admits that the break of gauge will be an inconvenience. ‘The amount of it,’ he observes, ‘will depend very much upon the particular line of country upon which the change takes place, and upon the interests of the parties on either side, to increase or diminish the amount of inconvenience.’ Mr. Seymour Clarke thinks the public will experience very little inconvenience, and that there is no particular difficulty at the unloading at Oldcut, except when people go in shoals to Oxford. Mr. A. Saunders thinks that where two gauges meet, ‘there is an inconvenience, but I cannot call it an evil,’ which is certainly a very ingenious, but not very definite answer to an inconvenient, not an evil, question. These three gentlemen all propose the same remedies for the break, viz., small packages and parcels to be moved by a force of porters, or the body of the carriages to be removed bodily from the narrow wheels and axles, and laid down on broad frames and wheels, or to run the whole carriage-wheels and all, on broad trucks, and to pack minerals and coals in iron boxes, two to be transferred in one broad gauge truck. Mr. Cubitt considers that this transfer is a ‘mere matter of cost,’ which indeed is perfectly true, and the same may be said of the additional price of a bale of cotton carried from Bristol to Manchester by rail. Mr. Vignoles does not believe the public could be made to pay the extra expenses involved by a break of gauge. In practice, as before stated, he avoids the difficulty by invariably preserving the strictest uniformity between the lines he constructs and the lines he runs into. Mr. Stephenson, Mr. Nicholson Wood, and Mr. Ellis, the deputy-chairman of the Midlands, give instances on the Erewash, on the Liverpool and Manchester, and on the Midlands Railways, where the loose boxes, and all the other remedies proposed by the three advocates of the broad gauge, have been tried on a large scale, and entirely failed. Mr. Wyndham Harding, and Mr. J. M. O’Connell, from the results of their experience at a break of gauge, prove, in the most complete and satisfactory manner, that although on paper very ingenious palliatives may be prepared, in practice a break of gauge is a commercial evil which would alone neutralize half the benefits of the railway system. The evidence of these two gentlemen is most important, from its eminently practical character. But by far the most striking evidence given on the break of gauge, as well as upon the comparative merits of the two gauges, is that tendered by the carriers. Making every allowance for the natural prejudices of Mr. Chaplin and his partner in favour of the narrow gauge lines, with which the former is connected, it is quite evident, from the facts brought forward by these gentlemen, as well as the parties connected with Mr. Pickford, that a break of gauge necessarily involves transshipment, and that transshipment involves loss by misdirection and pilferage, as well as a detention of hours, and an actual money-tax of from 1s. 6d. to 2s. 6d. per ton.”

If this be not sufficient to convince the reader who is in doubt about it, let him either as a merchant, or as the father of a few daughters, with cloaks, work-bags, and hand-boxes to match, either with or without the baby in arms, who may be left behind, once try the experiment, and we undertake to say he will be found ever afterwards a determined enemy to break of gauge.

The perfect completion of our railway system is a matter of the greatest importance;

it will open fresh sources of wealth, increase the power of the country, elevate the character of the people. The greatest intelligence should be brought to bear upon it, and all means taken to effect it in the best and least costly manner. We have made some woeful mistakes, and shall have to pay dearly for them by-and-by. Let us well consider future proceedings, so that we may avoid similar errors hereafter. The money that has been uselessly spent on nearly every line yet constructed, is enormous; the aggregate, it is not too much to say, would construct iron roads, under wise regulations, one-third the extent of those already in the kingdom. Look at the following statement:—

“The cost of the London and Birmingham Railway was about 52,882l. per mile; the Grand Junction, 22,232l.; Liverpool and Manchester, about 50,923l.; Great Western, about 56,372l.; London and Brighton, about 56,981l.; London and Greenwich, 267,270l.; London and South Western, about 28,004l.; London and Blackwall, 27,693l.; London and Croydon, 50,400l.; Birmingham and Gloucester, 29,000l.; Manchester and Leeds, 47,831l.; Midland Counties, 35,402l.; York and North Midland, 23,066l.; Dublin and Kingston, 59,122l.; Edinburgh and Glasgow, 35,024l.; Glasgow and Greenock, 35,451l.; Glasgow, Kilmarnock, and Ayr, 20,607l.; North Union, and Bolton and Preston, 27,799l.; Dublin and Drogheda, 15,652l.; Dundee and Arbroath, 8,570l. per mile.”

This list is highly suggestive, but we cannot now pursue the subject further. In concluding our present remarks, we avail ourselves of an article in the *Westminster Review*, to which we referred a fortnight ago, for the following extracts bearing on the railway question.

As to the late wild speculation:—

“The object of existence is explained by philosophers to be educational. They tell us that the world is a school in which we are to learn wisdom rather than practise it; and the daily evidence of facts would seem to confirm the theory. The teachings of experience are, however, expensive, and we should endeavor to profit by every lesson. The last, upon roads, has been a costly one. The difference in the market value of railway stock, between the first of September, 1845, and the first of April, 1846, is estimated, upon *strict shares alone*, at sixty millions sterling! There is no instance upon record of a corresponding depreciation of property to the same extent within the same time. The celebrated South Sea bubble and the Mississippi scheme of the last century were confined to a limited sphere of operation as compared with the late wide-spread empire of railway speculation, embracing England, France, Germany, and our colonial possessions; in all producing simultaneously the like results.”

Waste of money in preliminary expenses:—

“The legislature did nothing to economize the resources of the public, and unhappily it did worse than nothing in this respect, for it contrived additional means for wasting those resources; and so contrived them, although unintentionally, as to increase the eagerness for speculation, by supplying fuel for the flame.

We allude now to the standing orders of Parliament, and the legislative provisions of various acts affecting new railway projects, of which it is not uncharitable to assume that the real objects were two:—1st, the characteristic one of protection to landowners, empowering them to make their own terms with a company, or to defeat a bill upon a thousand and one technical points; and, 2nd, the discouragement of wild speculation by multiplying impediments, increasing expenses, and by bringing every new company to the verge of bankruptcy, to test its solvency.

This policy has now been pursued for some years. The parliamentary charges incurred by the London and Birmingham and Great Western Railway Companies in obtaining an Act of Incorporation were 100,000l. The two Direct Manchester lines, without even

* Railways, their rise, progress, and construction: by R. Nichol, C.E. Longman and Co. 1846.